

From There to Here: The Road to Reform of American High Schools

ISSUE PAPERS Preparing America's Future: The High School Initiative

The modern vision of high school, as expressed in the *No Child Left Behind Act*, is that every student will reach a high level of proficiency in core academic skills. But the current American high school education system is based on a model established when the expectations of high school education were far different. The model assumed that most students would not go on to postsecondary education or training, and that the majority had little need for rigorous academic preparation.

As teachers, principals, local and state local leaders work to implement *No Child Left Behind*, it is worth reflecting on how the American high school system has evolved, the assumptions upon which it rests, and the serious policy debates that should inform its future.

In the Beginning: Preparing the Elite

Until the 20th century, secondary education was a small-scale experience, largely reserved for the privileged, rather than the nearly universal democratic institution of today. Even as late as 1910, only about ten percent of American youth attended high school.

The first American high school—the Boston Latin Grammar School—was founded in 1635 to prepare young men for college at Harvard, service in government, and the church.¹ Although elementary education spread rapidly among the American population in succeeding generations, high school education did not. The first public high school did not even appear until nearly 200 years later, when the English Classical School opened in Boston in 1821.²

The English Classical School taught a curriculum consisting of the subject matter thought to best prepare young minds at the time: composition, declamation, mathematics, history, civics, logic, surveying, navigation, and moral and political philosophy.³ Other public high schools soon appeared in other parts of New England and New York. Their primary purpose was college preparation for young men, and enrollment remained quite small.

College Prep and Manual Training

By 1870, there were still only 500 public high schools with 50,000 students in the United States.⁴ But things were changing. It was in this era that enrollment first opened to girls—with many young women being trained in “normal” classes to become teachers—and working class youth entered high schools to learn skilled trades. It can be said that the modern public high school was born when the Michigan State Supreme Court ruled in 1874 that taxes could be levied to support public high schools as well as elementary schools.⁵ Thereafter, with the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of mass urbanization, large cities began to construct high schools.

Students enrolling in the new high schools of the late 19th century were not necessarily being prepared for college. While college preparatory schools still existed, “manual” (i.e. vocational) training schools began to multiply.

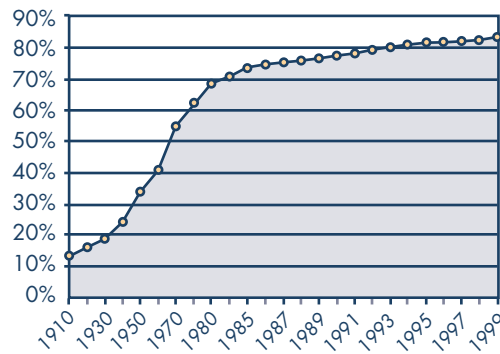
Many parents and students saw the “new vocationalism” as a shortcut to the new skilled jobs in the burgeoning factories and agricultural enterprises. Academic subjects came to be regarded as merely a part of, rather than the core of, the curriculum of the manual training schools.

Endnotes

- 1 Boyer, E.L. *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1983.) p. 43.
- 2 Boyer, p. 44.
- 3 Boyer, p. 44.
- 4 Boyer, p. 46.
- 5 Boyer, p. 46.
- 6 Boyer, p. 49.
- 7 Boyer, p. 49.
- 8 Kliebard, H. M. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958*. (New York: Routledge, 1986.) p. 12.
- 9 Kliebard, p. 50.
- 10 Boyer, p. 54.
- 11 Boyer, p. 249.
- 12 New York Times archives, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/specials/sputnik/>.
- 13 Kliebard, H. M. p. 266.
- 14 Boyer, p. 56.
- 15 J.R. Campbell, C.M. Hombo, and J. Mazzeo. *NAEP 1999 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance*. NCES 2000-469. Washington, DC: 2000.
- 16 National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. 1983).
- 17 U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 1996. *National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-1994; Descriptive Summary Report (NCES 2001-072)*, (Washington, DC, May 2001).
- 18 U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 2003. *The Condition of Education 2003 (NCES 2003-067)*. p. 18. Washington, DC.

Figure 2

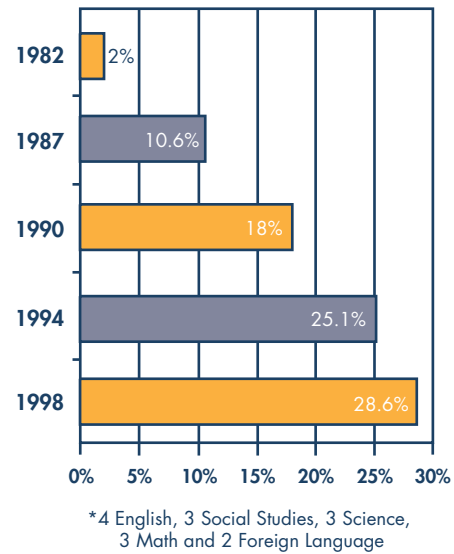
High School Completion
in the 20th Century
Percentage of Students Age 25 and Over
Completing High School through Grade 12 or a GED



Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2002). Digest of Education Statistics 2001 (NCES 2002-130). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Estimates excluding the GED put graduation rates much lower; see Greene, J., "Public High School Graduation." Manhattan Institute, 2003.

Figure 3

Academic Courses
Completed by High School Graduates
Percentage of Students Completing Academic
Courses* Necessary for 4-Year College Preparation



Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2002). Digest of Education Statistics 2001 (NCES 2002-130). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.



The Great Divide

Academic standards. By the end of the 19th century, some education leaders were becoming distressed by the uneven quality of high school education. In response, the presidents of the nation’s most prestigious colleges convened the first National Council of Education in 1892.⁶ Consisting of professors from Ivy League colleges, the Council, also known as the Committee of Ten, mapped a core of academic subjects that they considered necessary to prepare for college.

In addition to Latin, Greek and mathematics, the Committee added modern subjects that, in altered form, are still considered the core of the academic curriculum: English, foreign languages, natural history, physical science, geography, history, civil government, and political economy.⁷

The Committee of Ten did not believe that this curriculum was suitable only for those intending to go on to college, but for the entire high school population including those in the manual schools and those not intending to go on to further education or training. To the objection—one still heard today—that

this curriculum was not suitable for preparation for life and work, they countered that a liberal arts education, which trained the mind, was suitable for all students regardless of their future life path. Their message was simple: *there would be no distinction between those students preparing for college and those who were “preparing for life.”*⁸

But this view did not prevail for long.

General studies. Through the first two decades of the 20th century, wave after wave of new immigrants, many of them poor and with little formal education, arrived in the United States and in its growing high schools. Leaders in education and industry were not convinced this population was receiving the type of education needed to prepare them for life outside of school. They assumed that most students would go on to work in unskilled or semi-skilled work after high school and that the greatest need was for students to be acculturated to American society.

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, a group appointed by the National Education Association, issued *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. In it the Commission stated that the primary purposes of high schools were *health, citizenship and worthy home-membership and, only secondarily, command of fundamental processes.*⁹ Published by the U.S. Bureau of Education, this document helped lay the foundation for the modern American high school, with its emphasis on providing custodial care, what later came to be known as “life adjustment” education.

Enrollments continued to rise dramatically as child labor and truancy laws brought ever more students into the high schools. Attempts were still made to prepare some of these students for technical trades—Congress enacted the first federal vocational education legislation in 1917—and college prep schools persisted for the elite. However, it was *The Cardinal Principles* vision that dominated most schools. So-called “general” studies—neither specifically college nor technical preparation—began to push out the academic and career/technical disciplines.¹⁰ Rigorous academic studies suffered most, reserved as they were for the small minority of students deemed “college material.”

For the majority of students, neither an academic nor a vocational curriculum was considered appropriate

because these students were viewed as fit neither for the professions or the trades. At a conference on the U.S. Office of Education in 1945, Charles Prosser, the first director of the Federal Board for Vocational Education, offered opening comments in support of life-adjustment education. His comments later became known as the Prosser Resolution (see box at right).¹¹ The American high school with all of its ancillary cultural institutions from Friday night football to the senior prom—and its loose academic standards—became embedded in the public mind. The schools seemed to meet the demands of the time. They were universal and democratic and produced a more or less standardized product without requiring too much homework. The great mass of immigrants and their children were acculturated to American life. On average, it seemed that up through the Second World War, American youth were well prepared compared with those in other countries where universal secondary education had yet to take hold.

Sputnik - New Urgency Amid Old Expectations

Thus, it was a shock to the public when in the 1950s and 1960s the United States found itself falling behind other countries, especially the Soviet Union, in critically important academic skills symbolized by the science needed to launch Sputnik in 1957.¹² The economic rise of Germany and Japan highlighted the academic failings of American schools, as well. The state of academics in the American curriculum—particularly math and science—was suddenly decried from all corners.

Policymakers and educators responded by adding more courses and ever-larger facilities with all of the modern trappings—science labs, football fields, and band rooms. However, their concern was for the elite, defined by educators as the top 20 percent of students, who would become the scientists and engineers who would win the Cold War.¹³

What the policymakers did not do was re-examine assumptions about the capabilities of most young Americans. Schools continued to believe that students should be sorted among various tracks—academic, vocational and general—depending on their test scores and, more often, the judgment of guidance counselors as to their suitable destinies. Most students were judged not to be “college material” and, thus,

It is the belief of this conference that...the vocational school of a community will be able better to prepare 20 percent of its youth of secondary school age for entrance upon desirable skilled occupations; and that the high school will continue to prepare 20 percent of its students for entrance to college. We do not believe that the remaining 60 percent of our youth of secondary school age will receive the life adjustment training they need and to which they are entitled as American citizens – unless and until the administrators of public education with the assistance of the vocational education leaders formulate a similar program for this group.

—The Prosser Resolution, Charles Prosser, 1945

did not need rigorous academic preparation. The more the schools changed (bigger budgets, better facilities), the more they remained the same (low academic expectations for the majority).

Equality and Access

Before it had a chance to fully address the Sputnik shock, the education system became the center of new storms roiling society—civil rights for minorities and equal access for children with disabilities. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s significant efforts were made to ensure that all students had equal access to public education. Two important actions were the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* (1954)¹⁴ ending legal segregation, and the Education of all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 mandating full educational opportunities for all children with disabilities.

At the same time, large numbers of middle-class families were moving out of urban centers to suburban areas, resulting in dramatic decreases in the tax base for urban public education. A consequence of this outward migration was that inner cities were left with large low-income minority high schools. Despite the large amounts of compensatory funding from the federal government since the mid-1960s, these schools continue to struggle.

In the postwar period, as in the first half of the century, graduation rates improved, but there was little corresponding improvement in reading, and inconsistent improvement in math and science as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.¹⁵

A Nation at Risk

This lack of overall academic progress became increasingly apparent to business leaders, policymakers, and educators as the economy faced new challenges from Europe and Asia, where post-war reform had made rigorous academic education nearly universal. In 1983, Secretary of Education Terrell Bell appointed the National Commission on Excellence in Education to address the issue.

The Commission’s report, *A Nation at Risk*, marked the first time a government-sponsored report prompted serious discussion and action to implement higher academic standards for all students.¹⁶ In issuing the report, the Commission expressed alarm that the rise of global trade and the United States as the leading world power, and the dawn of the information age, were not being accompanied by complementary changes in the schools.

A Nation at Risk harkened back to the Committee of Ten, renewing the demand that American schools provide all students with access to a rigorous academic curriculum. Since its publication, virtually all states have raised the number of academic credits required for graduation and have made academic standards more rigorous. Some have established curriculum-based and other examinations linked to high school graduation. Some cities are also funding choice programs that offer students greater access to a more rigorous curriculum.

But progress since 1983 has been slow and uneven. After decades of reform, it is true that 60 percent of high school students, including more occupational/technical education students, now complete the number of academic credits recommended

“All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.”

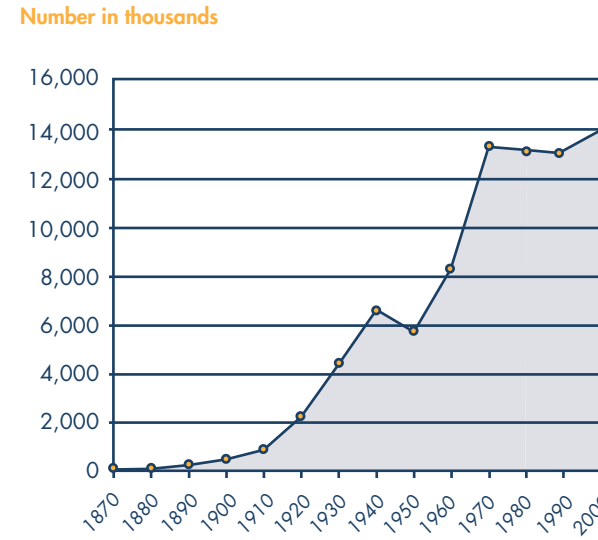
— A Nation at Risk, 1983

by the Commission as necessary for postsecondary education or training.

Yet it is still not clear—given stagnant test scores and climbing high school dropout rates—whether the quality of the curriculum, not just course titles, is consistent across and even within the same high schools. It is, indeed, not clear whether the rising number of students taking core academic courses represents real improvement over 20, or even 50, years ago. Moreover, whatever progress has been made in the past 20 years, the economy, and its demand for ever higher academic proficiency, has changed more than either the high school curriculum or student performance.

Today’s world demands a higher level of expectations and academic achievement. Establishing high expectations for all is a critical first step. Students and their parents have made their choices about the direction they wish to pursue—97 percent of high school graduates indicate that they intend to pursue some sort of postsecondary education at some point in their lives.¹⁷ But too few are offered—or guided to—the types of courses that will prepare them for their chosen future.

Figure 1
High School Participation in the 20th Century
Students Enrolled in High Schools — Grades 9-12



Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2002). Digest of Education Statistics 2001 (NCES 2002-130). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.